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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Lebanon: Bleak Past--Dark Future

Summary

Fourteen years of civil war have dissolved the country's political order, deeply fragmented Lebanese society, and prompted waves of external intervention, setting the stage for a struggle between Syria and Lebanese Christian leader Awn. Despite ongoing Arab League efforts to arrange a cease-fire and a political settlement, we believe Syria remains determined to remove Awn from power. If he survives the current round of turmoil, Syria almost certainly will escalate military pressure against the Christian enclave. Other unsavory potential scenarios include a continuation of the current state of "violent stagnation" or the final creation of a Christian mini-state. The prospects for stability are bleak, as is the possibility of reconstituting the Lebanese political system, especially as long as Awn remains in power. Lebanon's political disorder may have dangerous regional spillover effects as rising tensions increase the likelihood of clashes between the foreign backers of Lebanon's political factions.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Arab-Israeli Division, and [redacted] Issues and Applications Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted]

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Background

Longstanding and profound disagreements over the distribution of political power and Christian unwillingness to accept political reform are at the root of the Lebanese crisis. The 1943 National Charter, which apportioned government positions according to the size of religious sects and gave the bulk of governmental authority to the Christians, has been rendered obsolete by the emergence of a Muslim majority. The formation of rival Muslim and Christian governments after last year's failed attempts to elect a President probably marked the death of Lebanon's constitutional system. [REDACTED]

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The involvement of Israel, Syria, Iran, Iraq and other actors has accelerated and solidified the polarization of Lebanese politics. The presence of these foreign forces has disrupted occasional Lebanese efforts at political reconciliation and has strengthened factions opposed to compromise. Some 32,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon--about 10,000 in the Beirut area alone--undercut the authority of the feeble central government and strengthen the military clout of pro-Syrian factions. The Israeli presence in southern Lebanon has radicalized many of Lebanon's Shias and provided Damascus with a rationale for not withdrawing its own troops. Tehran's involvement has served to propel the radical portion of the shia community into the center of the Lebanese conflict. Iraqi political support and arms deliveries, including attempts to deliver FROG rockets, embolden the Christians to continue resisting political compromise. [REDACTED]

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Every effort undertaken so far to achieve political reform in Lebanon has failed. Conferences held in the late 1970s and early 1980s among the country's political leaders produced no lasting results. The intervention of the United States in 1958, Syria in 1976, Israel in 1982, and the Multinational Force in 1983 produced only minimal and short-lived change. [REDACTED]

Tripartite Committee Initiative

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In the latest effort to broker a settlement, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Algeria--the members of the Arab League Tripartite Committee on Lebanon--issued a call on 16 September for the creation of a Security Committee to implement and supervise a cease-fire in Lebanon. The Security Committee is to arrange the lifting of the blockade, monitor ships that might be carrying weapons, open the airport, and call on all factions and their supporters to stop supplying arms. Once this is done, the committee--whose composition has not yet been announced--is to invite members of the Lebanese parliament to meet and discuss political reform. [REDACTED]

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Progress toward lasting political compromise in Lebanon depends largely on bringing an end to the bitter feud between Syrian President Assad and Christian Prime Minister Awn, an issue that has not been directly addressed by the League effort. The Syrians have been asked only to pull their troops back to the Bekaa Valley two years after national reconciliation has been achieved--a demand they probably consider meaningless. They will remain determined to eliminate Awn--a fact he realizes--and the League initiative almost certainly will collapse unless a way can be found to expect significant additional pressure on both Awn and Damascus to compromise.

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Increased Syrian Pressure on Christians

If the Arab League effort fails increasing Syrian military pressure on the Christian enclave is almost certain and is likely to be the dominant scenario in Lebanon in the near term, in our view. Although current Arab efforts to arrange a cease-fire and political settlement may temporarily stay Syria's hand, Damascus remains determined to bring Lebanon's recalcitrant Christian leadership to heel by forcing the removal from power of Acting Prime Minister Awn. Damascus so far has tried to wear the Christians down by laying siege to the enclave and subjecting it to artillery barrages, in apparent hopes of impelling the Christians themselves to oust Awn. Damascus now appears determined to intensify the military pressure to drive home to the Christians that Awn must go.

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We expect Damascus to rely mainly on Lebanon's Muslim militias to confront the Christians directly, while Syrian military forces continue to shell and blockade the Christians. More raids into Christian territory by Lebanese Muslim militias--like the August attack near Suq al-Gharb--are likely, particularly simultaneous attacks along several fronts.

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Syrian airstrikes against the enclave are also possible. We believe overflights of Lebanon indicate Damascus may be seriously considering this option.

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If continued Syrian shelling and increased military pressure by Syria's Muslim allies do not force the Christians to remove Awn, Damascus probably would launch limited military actions of its own on the ground. In our view, the most likely possibility would be a commando raid aimed at disposing of Awn at either the Presidential Palace or the Ministry of Defense, both of which are located near the Green Line dividing East and West Beirut. We envision a helicopter-borne commando assault timed to coincide with armor and infantry probes from West

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Beirut as the most likely Syrian tactic. Such an assault is within Syrian capabilities and would have a good chance for success. In our view, Damascus would not launch such an attack without timely and reliable information about Awn's whereabouts, which Syrian intelligence certainly is capable of obtaining.

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A conventional full-scale military assault aimed at occupying the enclave would be Syria's last resort. In our estimation, Syrian military forces surrounding the enclave are adequate for an attack, and Damascus could quickly position additional military assets in Lebanon if needed. Nevertheless, attacking the Christians head on would be a bloody affair, and Syrian President Assad's actions so far suggest he is not anxious to take the heavy political and military losses such fighting would involve. We believe his reluctance is compounded by the possibility that Israel would launch airstrikes of its own against Syrian forces attacking the Christians.

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Escalating military pressure on the Christians runs several risks for Damascus, particularly a greater chance of clashes with Israel and Iraq. Aerial reconnaissance or airstrikes could encounter Israeli aircraft overflying Lebanon, and an unintentional air engagement could embarrass Damascus. In addition, an air clash over Lebanon almost certainly would boost Christian morale and conceivably could temporarily reinvigorate the flagging relationship between Tel Aviv and the Christians. Syrian officials may believe, however, that an air engagement would refocus international attention on Israel's military presence in Lebanon, and would strengthen Syria's claims to lead the confrontation against Israel.

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More direct Syrian attacks on the Christians also could prompt Iraq to move troops to the border with Syria to divert Damascus's attention from the enclave. Baghdad already has supplied the Christians with large* quantities of arms and ammunition to punish Damascus for its support of Iran in the Gulf War. Iraq's attempts this spring to provide the Christians with FROG artillery rockets capable of hitting Damascus from the enclave underscore Iraqi intentions. Despite Baghdad's resolve to humiliate Damascus, Iraq appears unwilling to involve its own troops in more than border skirmishes or to send fighters to Lebanon.

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*We estimate that Iraq has delivered some 100 tanks, over 30 Armored Personnel Carriers, over 100 artillery pieces, and roughly 20 small patrol boats to the Christians between October 1988 and August 1989. Baghdad also provided similar quantities of ammunition and spare parts.

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Intensified Syrian-Christian fighting could lead to major regional tensions and create pressure for US diplomatic action. Clashes between Syria and Israel would undoubtedly involve US officials in efforts to head off a broader conflict. A buildup of Iraqi forces on the border with Syria also could prompt the Arab states to seek US assistance in quelling the tensions.

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Implications of Awn's Departure

We believe Syria's efforts to remove Awn from power by escalating the military pressure on the enclave are likely to succeed. Many Christian politicians and the leadership of the powerful Christian Lebanese Forces militia have long had grave doubts about Awn and regard his self-styled war of liberation against Syria as suicidal. Although political opposition to Awn within the enclave remains unorganized, the militia almost certainly began planning for Awn's removal after it clashed with Army Brigades loyal to Awn earlier this year. We suspect the evacuation of the US Embassy from Beirut will give new urgency to criticisms of Awn's campaign, questions about his leadership, and efforts to remove him.

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Awn is the sole remaining Christian leader with a claim to national legitimacy, and his departure from the scene would create a gaping political vacuum. The lack of a successor to Awn could lead to a round of Christian infighting and further fragmentation as the Army and the Lebanese Forces jockey for position. Nonetheless, Awn's removal could also spark feelers from some Christian leaders to Damascus. We are confident that both the militia and the Christian Army Brigades have been in contact with the Syrians in the past and might back political reform after Awn is gone if Damascus promises them a considerable measure of autonomy.

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Awn's removal probably would improve the prospects for mediation of a long lasting accord by the Arab League and other interlocutors. Syrian policy has been focussed on Awn, and Damascus might accept a political settlement after he leaves, as might Lebanon's Muslim factions. Washington and the Arab states could play a role in working out contentious issues in discussions between Damascus and the Christians.

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Violent Stagnation

The continuation of the current level of violence in Lebanon--with the same inconclusive results--is the next most likely scenario. We believe the current situation has become tolerable, perhaps even desirable, for some Christians. The deepening recognition of the de facto partition of Lebanon into Christian and Muslim zones is reinforcing the unwillingness of

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hard-line Christians to share political power with the Muslims. The more the shelling and the blockade separate Lebanon's religious sects from one another, the more Christian hardliners will regard it as solidifying the reality of a Christian mini-state. ()

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The current cycle of shelling and the growing litany of hardships, moreover, fuels the spiral of violence and works against those who are willing to make compromises for peace. We regard reports that Beirut has become a modern Dresden as journalistic excess, but there is ample evidence of great suffering, characterized by episodes of thousands of Beirutis fleeing the city, many permanently. The destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure, the country's economic problems, and the civilian death toll provide an environment in which few Lebanese political figures will abstain from taking revenge on those they hold responsible for their suffering. ()

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Arab League mediation efforts, even those backed by the most respected and influential Arab leaders, are unlikely to break the logjam. Although Assad and Awn suspend shelling during League deliberations and publicly appear to work with the League, neither has offered more than cosmetic concessions. We conclude that Assad sees Syria's military presence in Lebanon as a final trump card and is willing to endure Arab League criticism of the Syrian role in Lebanon indefinitely. Awn is unlikely to accept an Arab League-suggested compromise that does not support his call for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. He almost certainly will resume artillery shelling of West Beirut if League talks do not go his way. ()

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Formal Partition

Declaration of a Christian mini-state is a third possible scenario, even though preventing the creation of a Christian state is the essence of Syrian policy. We believe formal partition is possible but almost certainly would require Syrian preoccupation with other issues. Assad's health has been questionable for years, and his death or incapacitation could involve the Syrian leadership in a succession struggle that would temporarily eclipse Lebanon, resulting perhaps in the reduction of Syrian military forces confronting the Christians. It is also possible that if Assad passes from the scene, new Syrian leaders might be willing to accept a modus vivendi with the Christians in order to focus on consolidating their position at home. Iraqi provocations along the border--unrelated to the situation in Lebanon--could spark escalating clashes that would strain Syria's ability to defend itself against Baghdad while simultaneously projecting power into Lebanon. Clashes with Israeli forces resulting from air operations over Lebanon or Tel Aviv's retaliation for Syrian-backed attacks on Israel by

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radical Palestinian groups could lead Damascus to postpone a forceful response to Christian separatism. [REDACTED]

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The viability of a formal Christian state is questionable at best. The enclave, in our view, cannot defend itself adequately, nor can it sustain an independent economy. The likely outrage of Lebanon's Muslims toward formal partition practically guarantees continuing violence, even without Syrian participation. The recent attack along the Suq al-Gharb front by Muslim militiamen demonstrated the Christians' military manpower shortage and highlighted the difficulty the enclave would have in dealing with a major Muslim assault. We believe that although the Christians are better prepared for partition than Lebanon's other religious sects, they remain dependent on commerce with West Beirut and the outside world. [REDACTED]

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Negative regional and international reactions almost certainly would weaken a Christian state. Despite the willingness of some Arab states to work against Syrian domination of the Christians, accepting the secession of a religious minority would set a precedent few Arab states--particularly those with minorities of their own--would welcome. In addition, the United States has supported Lebanese territorial integrity and national sovereignty for decades. [REDACTED]

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We believe that despite the support of a large minority of the Shia community and strong backing from Iran for an Islamic Republic, Lebanon's Shias are not likely to welcome the creation of an Islamic ministate alongside the Christians. The most influential Hizballah cleric, Ayatollah Fadlallah, has stated that the political and religious diversity of Lebanon makes a fundamentalist regime virtually impossible. Unlike the Christians, the Shias are not concentrated in a single region of the country but are dispersed throughout southern Lebanon, West Beirut, and the Bekaa Valley, where powerful neighbors like Israel and Syria could intervene to strangle an infant Islamic Republic. In addition, opinion within the Shia community appears to favor redistributing power within the existing national political framework. Frustrated fundamentalists, for their part, will almost certainly guarantee that Lebanon remains a hotbed of terrorist activity. [REDACTED]

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Wild Cards

A major Israeli intervention could erase many Syrian gains and might redefine Lebanon's political future. Although Tel Aviv appears willing to tolerate Syrian domination of the Lebanese political system as long as Damascus does not threaten vital Israeli security interests, there is a very remote possibility that Israeli leaders might decide to demonstrate to

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the Syrians that subjugation of the Christians and an extensive Syrian military presence are not acceptable. If Israeli soldiers drove north of the Awali River, Syrian troops would be compelled to retreat or engage superior forces in a conflict with no assured outcome. The decline of Syrian influence probably would lead to a Christian community less willing to agree to major political compromises and a Muslim community less able to demand them. [REDACTED]

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An Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon is also unlikely but would remove one of Syria's main justifications for its armed presence in Lebanon. Despite misgivings over the durability of the pro-Israeli Christian Army of South Lebanon militia and the reliability of UN peacekeeping forces in southern Lebanon, there is a remote possibility Tel Aviv might consider halting its operations in Lebanese territory to gain a political advantage over Syria. Israel would nonetheless retain its ability to resume operations on Lebanese soil if the need arose. Damascus almost certainly would attempt to ameliorate the damage done to its rhetorical position by focusing regional attention on Israel's support for the Christian militia in the south. [REDACTED]

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The French, whose colonial administration of the Levant produced Lebanon, conceivably might intervene militarily to rescue the Maronites in the event their position became untenable. The movement of a naval task force to the eastern Mediterranean last month demonstrated the importance of the Lebanese issue to Paris, particularly the security of several thousand French citizens in Lebanon. It is also possible that Paris might offer Awn sanctuary rather than see him forcibly deposed and the Christian enclave thrown into disarray. Nevertheless, Paris does not appear to have clear plans other than facilitating a possible evacuation of its nationals, and would prefer failed diplomatic initiatives to a failed military adventure. [REDACTED]

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Baghdad is not eager to let Syria off the hook in Lebanon and is likely to work behind the scenes to thwart any Arab settlement that Iraq perceives as strengthening Assad. The Iraqis probably would publicly endorse a settlement to avoid Arab censure while looking for ways to undercut it. For example, Baghdad might finance arms purchases by its Lebanese Christian allies, encourage Lebanese Christians and Syrian dissidents to conduct terrorist acts against Syrian interests, and increase military training for the Christians. Iraq probably would seek other means to provoke Syria into violating an Arab agreement. [REDACTED]

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Hostages and Terrorism

Major US goals in Lebanon for some time have been to free the hostages, eliminate Lebanon as a terrorist base, and prevent Lebanon from becoming the cause of renewed hostilities between Syria and Israel. Only a scenario that leads to some kind of political accommodation satisfactory to most of the Shias is likely to accomplish these US goals. Although the hostage-holders are still insisting on an Islamic Republic, there is evidence that their leaders, at least, recognize the intractability of Lebanon's confessional divisions and will settle for less.

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CHRONOLOGY

1916 Britain, France, and Russia reach the Sykes-Picot Agreement carving up the Ottoman Empire after its defeat in World War I. France gains control over what is now Lebanon and Syria.

1920 France forms Greater Lebanon, combining Mt. Lebanon, Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, Tyre, Akkar, and the Bekaa Valley.

1943 Lebanon's Christian and Muslim leaders agree on a "National Pact" for sharing power.

1946 Lebanon wins its independence from the French.

1958 The first Lebanese civil war breaks out; the United States sends 15,000 troops at President Chamoun's request.

1969 President Nasir mediates the Cairo Agreements, which give the Palestine Liberation Organization the right to operate against Israel out of Lebanon.

13 April 1975 Civil war erupts when unidentified gunmen fire on a church in Christian East Beirut, killing four men, including two members of the Christian Phalange militia; the Phalange retaliates by killing 27 Palestinians riding a bus.

June 1976 Damascus sends 6,000 troops to Lebanon to protect Maronite Christians.

October 1976 Syrian buildup reaches 22,000 after Arab League creates predominantly Syrian Arab Deterrent Force.

1978 Israel launches an invasion of southern Lebanon in March but withdraws in July.

April 1979 Arab Deterrent Force becomes entirely Syrian as other Arab contingents pull out.

June 1982 Israel launches large-scale invasion, defeats Syrian army and air force and captures Beirut.

September 1982 President-elect Bashir Gemayel is assassinated, triggering a massacre in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by Phalange militia.

May 1983 President Amin Gemayel signs peace accord with Israel.

October 1983 United States Marine barracks blown up.

February 1984 Lebanon abrogates treaty with Israel.

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1985 Israel unilaterally withdraws troops from Lebanon.

December 1985 Syria negotiates Tripartite Agreement with Amal head Barri, Druze chieftain Jumblatt, and Christian leader Hubayqa calling for a new constitution.

January 1986 Samir Jaja's anti-Syrian wing of the Lebanese Forces ousts Hubayqa and denounces the Tripartite Agreement.

September 1988 Lebanon fails to hold a presidential election, leaving the country with Syrian-backed Muslim Prime Minister Huss and rival Christian Lebanese Armed Forces leader Awn.

May 1989 Arab League summit in Casablanca creates Tripartite Committee composed of Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco to work out a solution to the Lebanon problem.

September 1989 Tripartite Committee announces its initiative.

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